

Inside Kabul Women's Jail

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Some of the inmates are there just for fleeing their homes.

On a bitterly cold winter's day, the inmates of Badam Bagh prison in the Afghan capital Kabul do whatever they can to keep warm. With no stoves in their cells, some cover themselves with blankets, while others huddle together in a queue for soap, washing powder and baby diapers.

"We spend all day and night just wrapped in blankets, as there's no way of warming up our rooms," said Razia, 22. "The whole city is short of electricity these days. Officials acknowledge this but don't do anything about it."

As well as the cold, Badam Bagh's female inmates complain that nutrition and healthcare are inadequate, and that prison warders mistreat them and ignore bullying by other prisoners.

Badam Bagh is a new facility, set up in 2007 with Italian government assistance. It currently holds about 230 female inmates plus 70 children under four, whom mothers are allowed to keep with them.

One 21-year-old inmate called Nadia complained that prison staff turned a blind eye to bullying. She recalled one incident in which an inmate was set on fire in a quarrel with other women. Fellow-prisoners helped extinguish her burning clothes, Nadia said, but staff "did not intervene to resolve the problem, even though they witnessed the incident".

Prisoners say medical care is poor, with only a few medicines prescribed to treat a wide range of ailments.

Lailuma, 38, said prison staff practiced double standards when it came to healthcare, and more affluent inmates got better treatment.

"There are some prisoners who wear trousers and make-up, so clearly they're getting help from outside prison. If these fashionable women get a little sick, they are taken for treatment in hospitals outside prison, and their visitors can continue to see them," she said. "But on the inside, there are people who won't get any attention even if they die of their illness. Their visitors don't get to see them when they are supposed to."

Lailuma pointed out Mahtab Gul, a 65-year-old woman lying in bed.

"Look, this is an old woman who doesn't have fancy clothes. She wasn't taken to hospital, nor were her visitors allowed to come and see her," she said.

Mahtab Gul wept as she described her predicament.

"My blood pressure has been very high for three days now, but no one is getting me treatment here, nor will they let me leave prison for treatment," she said. "I was arrested along with two of my daughters and accused of murdering my daughter-in-law. Although her own family understands that she committed suicide and that we are innocent, we are still in prison and our fate is uncertain."

Ramin, 17, was visiting Badam Bagh to see his brother's wife, and said it was often difficult for visitors to secure meetings. He confirmed that medication and decent food were in short supply.

He said his sister-in-law had accused prosecutors of asking for money or sex in return for leniency.

"These women can't complain anywhere as there is no one to hear their voices," Ramin said.

Other inmates accused prosecutors and police of asking for favours in return for a softer sentence or release.

In response, Basir Azizi, spokesman for the Attorney General's Office, the central prosecution service, said that anyone who had a legitimate complaint should have filed it with his agency.

"We are an investigative body, so we don't believe in speculation and rumours. I am totally convinced that these allegations that prosecutors have made unlawful demands are lies," he said.

Azizi said prison inmates who made such complaints were simply unhappy that the courts had found against them.

"You journalists shouldn't believe the words of these prisoners - they say whatever they want."

Abdul Habib Rezwani, spokesman for the Afghan prisons agency, refused IWPR's request for an interview, saying he was too busy and adding "We don't want the prisoners' words to be published [either], because they tell lies."

Prison governor Zarafshan Naibi initially denied IWPR permission to interview the inmates but then relented. She too dismissed claims of mistreatment and poor conditions as lies.

"The prisoners don't have any problems, and [if they do] these are quickly addressed," she said.

One prison staff member who asked to remain anonymous told IWPR that there were problems at the prison, but that the head, Naibi, was reluctant to "disclose the realities".

"The governor does not want to be questioned," the officer said.

Latifa Sultani, coordinator for women prisoners' rights at the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, confirmed that staff at prisons tried to prevent the media from reporting problems on the inside.

"The prisons have some shortcomings, and officials don't want this to leak out, because they don't want to come under scrutiny," she said, adding that the government was fearful that negative stories would stem the flow of international donor funds.

Sultani said that where there was a degree of openness, conditions improved.

"For example, the womens' prison in Herat is in better shape, as media outlets and human rights observers can inspect it at any time," she said.

The slow-moving nature of Afghanistan's judiciary means that legal cases remain almost static, with inmates seeing little progress towards trial or appeals hearings.

Razia, 22, has been in prison for two years, accused of having a relationship with her husband's cousin, a charge she denies.

This falls into the category of "moral crime", a loosely-defined term under which many of the female prisoners are here. It refers to women accused of sexual misconduct, running away from home or refusing to get married. These are not offences in the written criminal code, but it is common for courts to impose jail sentences.

Razia was jailed just because family members heard raised voices from another room, as she fended off yet another unwanted advance by her male relative.

Nadia has spent the last year in prison for leaving home after her husband had an affair.

"When I realised my husband had begun an unlawful relationship with another woman, I couldn't bear it," Nadia said. She left home and remarried.

"When the police arrested me for running away from home, they took me to a police station where the chief asked me to have sex with him, offering to release me if I did. But I refused," she said.

"This is a country in which an unlawful request made by a police officer isn't illegal, but a legitimate act [like leaving home] is," she continued.

Mina Habib is an IWPR-trained reporter in Kabul.

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